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In South Korea, Anger at U.S. Spreads

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SEOUL, South Korea, June 6 — Ever since American troops died defending this nation in the Korean War, Americans have basked in the gratitude of the Korean people. But now the image of a benevolent America is being called into question as a new wave of anti-Americanism moves off campus and into the mainstream.

Students have long denounced the United States as a repressive force in Korean politics, accusing Washington of pressing a Cold War ideology that divided Korea into two nations and supporting Korean dictators. But even for the majority of Koreans who reject such virulent anti-Americanism, the new openness of political debate is prompting a more detached, more critical view of the United States.

Increasing anger about United States pressures on Korea to open its markets and pay for more its defense is dovetailing with a growing national pride. As South Korea emerges as an economic power and looks toward the summer Olympics here, a new self-confidence feeds an old xenophobia nursed over centuries of foreign interference.

New Freedom of Expression

"Questions about the role of America have been in Korean minds for a long time, but they haven't been discussed openly," said Lee Chul, an opposition politician. "Americans say they are losing economic power, but we see they are rich, much richer than us. American pressure makes Korean farmers and workers mad. American realpolitik has led it to deal with immoral and illegitimate regimes."

Students, who have long called for the withdrawal of American troops as a prelude to reunifying the two Koreas, are freer to express these ideas more openly in the new political climate. While most Koreans do not support such drastic measures, they are voicing resentment at stepped-up American pressure to import cigarettes and beef, and are starting to chafe at the pervasive American cultural and political influence here.

Signs of this new attitude abound. A Korean businessman who numbers American diplomats among his friends ralls against American immorality for pushing American cigarettes on the Korean people. The opposition leader, Kim Dae Jung, though critical of student violence — like a recent attack on the United States Embassy — has said that he can understand student anger and has called on the United States to prove its commitment to democracy by supporting changes here and distancing itself from the Government. Revisionist historical theories that blame the United States for dividing Korea are openly discussed in universities.

To some Koreans, the protector is becoming a bully that compromised its political ideals by supporting the authoritarian rule of former Presidents

Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee, and Chun Doo Hwan.

"In the past, I vaguely thought of America with good will, but not any more," said Y. N. Chung, a 32-year-old carpenter. "It doesn't mean I don't like America. Now I can see what is good and what is bad."

Even as Seoul prepares to host the Olympics, a showcase for nationalism, Koreans encounter constant reminders of American influence. Of all the foreign embassies, only that of the United States flies its flag on Seoul's main boulevard next door to Korean Government ministries and near the statue of Admiral Yi, the hero who saved Korea from Japanese invasion in the 1500's.

A major American military base, Yongsan, occupies prime real estate in the heart of Seoul, its rolling green

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lawns and split-level homes a miniature of suburban America. American television beams into Korean homes through the broadcasts of the Armed Forces Korea Network.

Some Koreans resent what they see as American cultural arrogance. "Americans probably see Korea as inferior, and it hurts our pride," said C. H. Kim, a 27-year-old captain in the Korean Army. "All the shops in the area around the bases use English. Why do they have to use English and not Korean?"

While few Koreans support the students' call for troop withdrawal, President Roh Tae Woo has said he wants South Korea's defenses to be self-sufficient by the 1990's.

'Simple Resentments'

Choi Chang Yoon, a senior ruling party lawmaker and former high-ranking Government official, traces two strains of anti-American sentiment here. One, he said, is the product of "simple resentments" of American influence and trade pressures and a corresponding surge of Korean nationalism. "That kind of anti-American sentiment is possible in any bilateral relationship between a superpower and a country under its influence," he said. "We don't worry so much about that category, because it's natural, as anti-Americanism is in Canada or Germany."

But he is more concerned about the students' ideological anti-Americanism, which he said was influenced by North Korean propaganda, and how it may be influencing the public.

The student protests are highly visible, and they have become increasingly violent in the past few weeks. Today, a student who set himself on fire Saturday to protest the American and Government roles in the Kwangju killings died. It was the third student political suicide in a month. In the Kwangju incident, in May 1980, Government troops killed hundreds of demonstrators in an uprising in the southwestern city.

"Nowadays, anti-Americanism as an ideology is beginning to spread to people who have simple resentments," Mr. Choi said. "It's becoming very complicated."

It is impossible to estimate what percentage of South Koreans hold anti-American views, although it is clear that people who criticize the United States range from the average man in the street to some powerful opposition politicians. While Government policy remains resolutely pro-American, South Korea's new commitment to democracy means officials must heed popular sentiment — and opposition politicians, who now hold a majority in the legislature, are taking a harder line on trade issues.

Part of the problem, Americans here say, is that Koreans still seek to rally American support for their causes while trying to push Americans away.

While Korean students denounced American intervention, they asked the United States for support when they took to the streets last June and forced the Government to adopt democratic changes. While Kim Dae Jung criticized the United States for being too close to Mr. Chun, he was willing to accept American intervention when Mr. Chun's Government condemned him to death for sedition.

Ambivalent About History

Koreans display a similar ambivalence about their own history, looking back with anger — and a touch of shame — at a series of foreign invasions over many centuries by Mongols, Chinese and Japanese, among others. Some Americans, however, argue that Koreans tend to overemphasize their own helplessness in the face of foreign power and underplay their share of responsibility for the tragedies of the past.

"Yes, anti-Americanism is spreading, because it fits the psychological flow of the period, which is resentment over the junior status of the Republic of Korea in the relationship with America," said a Westerner who has long studied Korean politics and who has lived in this country for almost 30 years. "One of their problems is the agony of being under the influence of a strong outside power to which officials have kowtowed to one degree or another. The other aspect is a generation who doesn't know the Korean War and embraces whatever is useful in sustaining the damage to their ego as they look at their history. There is a temptation to see foreigners as being responsible. That way, they don't perceive their own folk as being all that bad."

American officials are bracing for more criticism as the legislature prepares to investigate the Kwangju incident. The crushing of the protests helped consolidate former President Chun Doo Hwan's grip on power, but many Koreans, citing the close American relationship to the Korean military, blame the United States for either masterminding the harsh military response or acquiescing to it.

"We are going to come in for a beating in the short term," said an American diplomat. "In the long term it will come out okay, and I hope we'll be viewed in a more objective light. There is total agreement in our government that for a really healthy relationship, there's got to be more equilibrium."